

Inclusive Communities and Schools—A State Board Priority

The State Board of Education is in the midst of reviewing its policies related to school integration and diversity. The process began in March of 1998 when the Board invited Dr. Gary Orfield, Director of the Harvard University Project on School Desegregation, to discuss national trends and legal issues related to school desegregation. The board then reviewed an historical perspective on school desegregation in Iowa. Subsequently three school districts (Burlington, Des Moines and West Liberty) were invited to share their perspectives on the trends related to integration and diversity within their local communities.

The Board then scheduled a number of work sessions in which they reviewed current research and the educational, legal and political issues related to diversity and school integration. At a November 1998 work session the board decided it was time to open up the discussion to get input from citizens at the local level.

The Board approved a plan to implement a series of community conversations. Seven conversations were held during the spring and summer months of 1999. The conversations were entitled “Building Inclusive Schools and Communities in Iowa”, and they were organized in collaboration with local officials. The purpose of the conversations was to encourage deliberative discussions on diversity and integration issues, as well as to provide ideas and insights for the State Board of Education that would lead to a more effective public policy.

The conversations were designed to help ensure that diverse points of view were heard and that the pros and cons of various public policy options were discussed in a deliberative manner. Seven communities hosted conversations. They were Davenport, Des Moines, Marshalltown, Perry, Sioux City, Waterloo and West Liberty. The records of the conversations were summarized in a document entitled “Building Inclusive Schools: A Summary Report,” and shared back with the State Board.

Department of Education staff with input from the State Advisory Committee on Educational Equity examined the research and the summary of the conversations to develop a set of principles that would form the foundation for future state policy on developing inclusive schools and communities in Iowa. A set of sixteen principles was presented to the State Board at its February, 2000 meeting where they were reviewed and approved.

A paper outlining the State Board of Education’s vision for inclusive communities and schools was developed between March and May of 2000. The paper is entitled “Envisioning Inclusive Communities and Schools for the Twenty-First Century.” A draft of the paper was sent to numerous school and community based constituents for their comments. The paper was then revised and presented to the Board in August for approval. The vision paper was approved by the State Board and is being disseminated widely across the state in an effort to share the Board’s vision regarding diversity in schools and communities.

Work related to the development of future policy will commence in September, 2000. Proposed policies will be presented to the State Board in the fall of 2000 with an anticipation of the final adoption in the spring of 2001. It is the intent of the State Board that the proposed policies result in schools, which provide a welcoming and supportive learning environment for all students, high levels of academic achievement for all students, and which foster respect for the diversity within the school, the community, the state and the nation.